

Watching the Soccer Match Italia-Romania

Maria Rita Latto (June 16, 2008)



Italia-Romania - an event that many interpret as more than mere sport, one that carries many implications beyond the soccer field and that touches on issues of racism, xenophobia, and politics

Watching the soccer match at my father's apartment is a must, especially since our national team is the world champion. Except this time it is not a typical match. According to the media it is simply "the mother of all matches:" Italy vs. Romania.



It is an event that many interpret as more than mere sport, one that carries many implications beyond the soccer field and that touches on issues of racism, xenophobia, and politics. A reader of the extreme-left newspaper *Liberazione* started the argument days before: in a country as deeply racist as Italy, why should we support the national team which “represents the worst of Italy? Why choose to support the country seen by so many Italians as the receptacle for gypsies, vampires, and prostitutes?”

It is a debate that has provoked many reactions, especially on the left, where some proponents of the Rifondazione Comunista Party, such as Manuela Palermi and Graziella Mascia, responded by enthusiastically suggesting that we support Romania against Italy. Others, such as Giovanni Russo Spena, found a compromise: “We are all Rom and Romanians. I am not going to support either Romania or Italy, but good soccer.” The opinion of the Ministro Roberto Calderoli (Lega Nord), instead, left us speechless: “The Romanians? Let them win the match if they agree to take the Roms back to Romania. I would only be sorry for Coach Roberto Donadoni who is from Bergamo, like me!”

So the expectations surrounding the event were incredibly high and transformed a soccer match into a potential opportunity for revenge, one of the many episodes that have created a strained relationship between Italian and Romanian diplomats. Through the press, the ambassador of Romania to Italy officially reminded us that in every competition there are losers and winners and that, of course, he wished that the team lead by coach Piturca would be successful. Though, he added, the best option would be if both teams could advance to the next round of the European championships.

This attitude is typical of a supporter wishing to show some sense of fair play while not forgetting his diplomatic role! Despite fair play, tensions remained and prompted the city of Rome to deny the authorization to install wide screens in some parts of the city to allow the many Romanians, and of course the Italians, to watch the match in public. This absurd decision came after the advice given to Mayor Gianni Alemanno by Eugen Tertelac, a spokesperson for the Association of Romanians in Italy, who was worried about potential incidents between Italians and Romanians after the match as they both could use it as an excuse to vent previous grudges. Luckily other mayors did not adopt the same measure. In Turin, for example, and in many other cities wide screens were installed in strategic places and anyone could watch the match.

Players on both teams tried to maintain low profiles and avoid any political comments on the match, even though the debate between the Italian and the Romanian governments about clandestine immigration inevitably left a deep mark. There were echoes of this in Romania, where the front page of the major newspaper *Jurnalul National* ran a headline which urged players to “chase out the macaronari.” The article continued in the same tone, characterizing the match as a time to revenge their honor which was disgraced by the xenophobic Italians. “All of the insults against the Romanians living in Italy,” the newspaper article continued, “should go back to those who caused them, multiplied by ten times.” No doubt the pre-match atmosphere was heated!

I decided to go to my father’s house and watch the match with him and his Romanian caregiver, Daniela. My sister, Carmen, and her 20 year-old son Ciprian also joined us for the occasion. He works in a restaurant and hopes that the Romanians do not win or humiliate the Italians, fearful of the reaction from his employer, a devoted fan of the Roma and Italia teams. Daniela prefers not to watch the match saying that, after all, “it is just a match,” and goes to another room with her sister to look at some photos that have just arrived from their family in Romania. My father is following the event in a rather sober way, as usual, and does not see any of the political implications. After the goal by Adrian Mutu, a Romanian player on Italy’s Florentine team, Daniela and her sister rush back into the room to see the replay and imagine what is happening at that moment at home. Ciprian is jumping as his cell phone starts ringing, and his friends call to comment on the magnificent goal. My father and I watch their joy and have no reaction, sure that there is still time. We are not particularly upset, and the image of them celebrating also cheers us up. Unfortunately, their joy soon ends. After a minute, Christian Panucci makes the Romanian fans freeze and this time the Italians are celebrating the goal; it is “friendly revenge” for the Azzurri. Ciprian is sad, but not too much, probably because Daniela brings us sandwiches, trying to chase away the bitterness of the moment. Emotions



alternate until Mutu's mistaken penalty – it is a deep disappointment for the Romanians who are so close to beating the world champions!

The match ends in a draw. After so many highs and lows, a cold beer is the best way to celebrate the result that did not hurt any of us, Italians or Romanians. The living room in my father's house is one happy oasis where polemics do not exist and the “mother of all matches” is seen as a friendly game between grandparents and caregivers, and nothing else.

(Edited by Giulia Prestia)

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